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Social media and pre-project intercultural dialogue in international workcamps – potential and reality

Social Media und interkultureller Dialog im Vorfeld internationaler Workcamps – Potentiale und Realität

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Abstract (English)

Due to their widespread use all over the world, German youth workers have proffered the suggestion that, without the explicit influence of teamers and instructors, participants at youth projects extensively use social media to enter into pre-project intercultural dialogue. Against this backdrop an empirical study was conducted. It was designed to determine if and how participants of international workcamps use social media to initiate pre-project communication. 394 volunteers from 34 different countries took part in a questionnaire survey and two participant observations were realised.

The analysis of the collected data indicates that approximately half of the volunteers used social media, more precisely social networks, to communicate with other group members or teamers before the beginning of a project. However, mutual communication took place primarily between volunteers and teamers. Amongst volunteers communication was mostly restricted to the one-sided consumption of contents; they seldom entered into actual (inter-cultural) dialogue. Consequently, no social structure developed within the examined groups before the start of a workcamp. The findings, thus, suggest that pre-project intercultural dialogue is not actually fostered by social media.

Keywords: social media, social networks, intercultural dialogue, international workcamps, youth exchange, communication

Abstract (Deutsch)

Vor dem Hintergrund ihrer weltweiten Popularität haben einige Praktiker der internationalen Jugendarbeit die Vermutung geäußert, Teilnehmende internationaler Begegnungsmaßnahmen würden, ohne Zutun der Teamer, bereits vor Beginn einer Begegnung Social Media in interkulturellen Dialog treten. Aufgrund dieser Annahme wurde eine empirische Studie durchgeführt, welche Aufschluss darüber gibt, ob und wie Teilnehmende internationaler Workcamps Social Media wirklich vor Beginn eines Projektes als Kommunikationsmittel nutzen. Dabei nahmen 394 Freiwillige aus 34 verschiedenen Ländern an der Fragebogenerhebung teil. Zudem wurden teilnehmende Beobachtungen in zwei Workcamps durchgeführt.

Die Analyse der erhobenen Daten zeigt, dass ca. die Hälfte der Freiwilligen Social Media, insbesondere Social Networking Services, nutzten, um vor dem Beginn der Begegnung mit anderen Gruppenmitgliedern und Teamern in Kontakt zu treten.

Tatsächlich fand eine wechselseitige Kommunikation aber hauptsächlich zwischen Freiwilligen und Teamern statt. Zwischen den Freiwilligen blieb es zumeist bei der einseitigen Aufnahme von Informationen. Nur selten traten diese tatsächlich in einen (interkulturellen) Dialog miteinander. In der Folge entwickelten sich vor Begegnungsbeginn keine sozialen Strukturen in der Gruppe. Die Daten legen nahe, dass der interkulturelle Dialog zwischen den Freiwilligen vor Projektbeginn nicht durch den Einsatz von Social Media gefördert wurde.

Schlagwörter: Social Media, soziale Netzwerke, interkultureller Dialog, internationale Workcamps, Jugendbegegnungen, Kommunikation

1. Introduction

“Le Service civil international a pour but de créer entre les peuples, par l’entraide, un esprit nouveau qui rendrait moralement impossible l’attaque d’un peuple par ses voisins devenus sincèrement ses amis.”
(Ceresole cited after Anet 1969:234)¹

Following World War I Europe found itself in an unprecedented state of destruction and despair. Against this backdrop, starting with the 1920s, an era began that was characterized by the foundation of a number of – mostly religious – private organizations convinced that international encounters and voluntary services were an important means for building bridges between people of various nationalities. By initiating peaceful intercultural dialogue they aimed at the fostering of mutual understanding and the prevention of acts of war. Inspired by this movement, a variety of short-, medium- and long-term, individual or group-based voluntary services were created – with international workcamps being one of the most important program types (Drost 2008:17f.).

Workcamps are short-term encounters, where, depending on the respective hosting organization, about ten to twenty five mostly young people between the age of 14 and 26 come together and volunteer in a non-commercial project. Volunteers come from various countries all over the world in order to work and live closely together for two to four weeks (AIGD 2010). Until the 1950s work projects primarily revolved around the reconstruction of Europe (JUGEND für Europa 2009:12). Today, young people work together on a

much wider range of projects – be it in the social, cultural or ecological sector (AIGD 2010).

While the altruistic support of the local community has always been a central part of the experience, international voluntary services also pursue a range of pedagogical objectives. Nowadays, social learning,² the support of independence and self-reliance, historic-political education and the strengthening of the volunteers’ democratic awareness are some of the chief aims of such voluntary services (Drost 2008:18f.). Besides those objectives, the fundamental idea of intercultural understanding has not dwindled in importance. Many organizations primarily look upon international voluntary services as a means of intercultural learning – including the strengthening of tolerance and openness, as well as the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices (JUGEND für Europa 2009:14). Hence, the considerate, respectful and productive interaction within a group of volunteers coming from various cultural backgrounds remains a key topic of international workcamps.

Even though workcamps traditionally commence with the first meeting on site, or in very few privileged cases with a preparation meeting, observations of German youth workers recently suggested that – not only with regard to workcamps but also all kinds of other (international) child and youth travels – the duration of contact is increasingly expanded beyond the beginning (and the end) of the face-to-face encounter. Without the influence of teamers or instructors, participants, according

to Kurz et al. (2011), increasingly use the possibility to communicate before meeting in person, in order to exchange project related and personal information. Some youth workers are under the impression that vivid exchange and – in the case of group based encounters – the development of first group phenomena before the beginning of a project are not unusual. In this process, social media, above all social networking services (hereafter SNS), seem to play an important part.

Those observations trigger numerous questions, both from the point of view of practitioners and of scientists. Thus, quite a few practitioners seem to be concerned with the potential risks of such developments. They wonder if group development might be influenced in a negative way, or if models that have been used so far in order to support group processes are indeed still valid, or need to be adapted.

From the point of view of intercultural communication studies another very interesting question arises: In how far can and do social networks foster pre-project intercultural dialogue in international workcamps (or for that matter in all kinds of international youth encounters)? As we are, so far, talking about individual observations and assumptions this includes the following guiding questions:

- What potential do social media, above all SNS, generally have with regard to the fostering of pre-project intercultural dialogue?
- In the case of pre-project communication, can there actually be talk of intercultural dialogue?
- In how far do adolescents and young adults actually use social media in order to communicate before international workcamps?

In order to approach these questions, it will first be outlined what we understand by the terms *intercultural dialogue*, *social media* and *social networking service*. In the following the theoretical potential of social media with the view

to pre-project intercultural dialogue will be discussed. Lastly, an empirical study will be presented that was designed to determine if, and how, participants of international workcamps use social media to initiate pre-project communication and what influence this may have on group development.

2. What is *intercultural dialogue*?

When we wish to ascertain whether social media, especially SNS, (can) foster intercultural dialogue in international workcamps, we first have to reflect upon the meaning of the expression intercultural dialogue. In fact, the term has gained a broad, popular scientific currency and is now marked by different, partially muddled interpretations when discussed by practitioners (e. g. in political or pedagogical contexts) as well as scientists within recent years (Conti 2012:208). However, no universal definition of the term has been determined thus far. Therefore, the concept's interpretation within the context of this paper should, firstly, be briefly outlined. For this purpose, the two constituent terms will be explained and integrated in a working definition.

2.1. Dialogue

The term dialogue is closely linked to the concept of communication which, in this paper, is basically defined as the one-sided or two-sided, synchronous or asynchronous, direct or indirect, private or public (Burmeister 2008:5f., Maletzke 1963) exchange of information, i. e. ideas, feelings or intentions, between two or more people (Schneider 1985:74, Pennington 2002:12).³ While the concept of communication also comprises fundamentally one-sided processes of information being transmitted from one or more senders to one or more receivers, with little or even no room for reaction on the receivers' side (monologic communication), the term dialogue is less extensive and necessarily implicates the social interaction between communication partners (Linell 2001:9). Juxtaposed to monologic com-

munication, dialogic communication is characterized by a certain degree of reciprocity (Bakhtin 1999); i. e. a dialogue is a two-way process between two or more people with each individual influencing the other and being influenced at the same time (Pea 1994:288). In the process, communication in general and dialogical communication in particular create and recreate the identity and self-concept of the respective communication partners who formulate, live and reformulate their cultural values, beliefs, goals etc. as well as shape and reshape their mutual relationships, thereby producing a certain social structure (Pearce / Pearce 2003, Sigman 1995:2). In other words, among others, dialogic communication condenses in social phenomena such as:

- Communication networks: more or less stable patterns of communication channels used for the exchange of information among group members (Forsyth 1990:129),
- Role structure: formal or informal relational system (Klawe 1996:175), in which each group member takes on one or more roles associated with a certain role behavior, personal and physical characteristics (Dahrendorf 2010:33ff.),
- Social group cohesion: “resultant of all the forces acting on all the members to remain in the group” (Festinger 1972:324, Cartwright / Zander 1960:74).

The term dialogue can be approached from two different perspectives: from a practical perspective, dialogue can be defined in the sense of a description, an empirical reality. From a philosophical perspective it can be described as an intended ideal. On this basis, we can differentiate between dialogue as communicative process which is oriented towards pure mutual understanding and dialogue as the abstraction of freedom from domination as well as cognitive and affective openness towards otherness (Conti 2012:101f., Matoba / Scheible 2007:20f.).

Even though the philosophical ideal of openness and equality is crucial, especially with view to intercultural communication processes, this paper focuses merely on the communicative perspective. On the one hand this is due to the fact that the study presented in the following only allows for a very limited insight into the attitudes and mindsets of volunteers. On the other hand the general potential of social media for intercultural dialogue should be examined primarily from a medial point of view, independently of individual preconditions.

With dialogic communication being examined from this perspective, it needs to be clarified in more detail *which* communicative processes are taken into consideration. Literature studies and linguistics usually refer to dialogue as a language-based synchronous interaction (Conti 2012:101f.). However, in the context of virtual communication, this definition seems to be too short-sighted. Considering that the interplay of action and reaction is the central feature of dialogic communication there is no reason why asynchronous interaction processes between spatially and temporally divided people, as they are rendered possible by the internet, should not be labeled as dialogue. Furthermore, within the virtual context, purely-language based communication can be complemented by pictures, videos and other forms of visual and / or acoustic tools.

With that in mind, in the context of this article, a dialogue is defined as a synchronous (e. g. life-chat) or asynchronous (e. g. private messages, postings) act of *reciprocal* communication based upon linguistic, as well as extra-linguistic tools. The mere reading of postings or user-profiles not followed by an *explicit* reaction towards the author, as well as the writing of postings which do not entail any explicit reaction on the readers' side, even though they may be considered communication, are not considered dialogue.

2.2. Intercultural dialogue

Starting from this working definition of the term dialogue, an *intercultural* dialogue can be basically described as a reciprocal communicative process between two or more people with different cultural backgrounds. Culture, in this context, is defined as the entirety of all manifestations of life that have been created by human action. This includes all material and immaterial products such as religion, ethics, law, technology, educational systems (Bolten 2007:24) as well as all explicit and implicit patterns of behavior which are acquired and passed on by symbols and which are closely linked to historically derived ideas and the respective values (Kroeber / Kluckhohn 1952:357).

Depending on whether a closed or an open concept of culture is represented, the term culture refers either to a spatially or a socially fixed group of people. In the first case culture can be defined by political, geographical or linguistic borders, or by a certain history of thought. In the second case this *container mentality* is erupted with cultures being defined as cohesion, not coherence based social lifeworlds of changing size and composition. This understanding takes into account the fact that relevant connections, especially in times of increasing globalization, often lie outside of national, political, philosophical or linguistic borders (Bolten 2007:15ff.).

Even though the author is a proponent of an open concept of culture, for pragmatic reasons the national concept of culture is used as orientation in the context of this paper. Despite the valid objection that cultures are neither closed nor homogeneous entities that can be described comprehensively within national borders (Bolten 2007:14f.), this approach can be justified by the influence that nations (still) have on human behavior, cognition and perception. Furthermore, international workcamps explicitly stress the encounter of volunteers from different nation-states and on peaceful international dialogue. In this context, intercultural dialogue can hence be defined as reciprocal commu-

nication between two or more people of differing national backgrounds.

Independently of the fact of whether an open or a closed concept of culture is applied, intercultural encounters are, by definition, characterized by some kind of interaction. Compared to the term multicultural, which describes the pure coexistence of culturally diverse individuals, the term intercultural does not refer to a static social structure but to a dynamic process during which members of different lifeworlds cannot rely on their individual cultural knowledge and, therefore, spontaneously negotiate common patterns of behavior for their specific situation. Insofar the collocation intercultural dialogue seems somehow redundant as the word intercultural automatically implies an interrelation between communication partners (Bolten 2007:22). However, the term dialogue puts an added emphasis upon the aspect of reciprocity from a communicative point of view.⁴

3. Potential of Social Media for pre-project intercultural dialogue

Starting from the previous deliberations, it will be the aim of the following chapter to outline why social media, above all SNS, may be an effective means to foster intercultural dialogue. For this purpose, the author's understanding of the terms *social media* and *social networking service* will be outlined, drawing parallels to intercultural dialogue in the process.

3.1. Social Media

Until fairly recently, the World Wide Web (WWW) was characterized by a low level of interaction possibilities. Apart from the opportunity to communicate mutually via chat and e-mail, contents were mostly provided one-sidedly by the operator of a website (Fisch / Gscheidle 2008:356, Thackeray 2008:339). Only in a few exceptional cases did recipients become providers and produced their own contents on,

in turn, mostly static websites (Fisch / Gscheidle 2008:356).

It was only with the rise of the so-called Web 2.0⁵ – a term that refers less to technological innovations of the time than to the changed usage of the WWW (Ebersbach et al. 2008:3) – that the approach to the Internet changed fundamentally (Fisch / Gscheidle 2008:356). A central element of the new way in which software engineers and users made use of technological possibilities (O'Reilly 2007:17) is the redefinition of the internet as a platform on which individuals no longer act as pure consumers but, at the same time, as producers (Koch / Richter 2007:3). While the active involvement in the content-related organization of the Internet had been limited to technically adept users so far, it is now also possible to publish and comment posts, to present oneself virtually and to network without prior knowledge (Fisch / Gscheidle 2008:356, Thackeray 2008:339).

Due to this development, interested users turn into “prosumers” (Bruns 2007:3). On the one hand they consume, on the other hand they create contents conjointly and make them available for one another with the help of Web 2.0 applications, the so-called social media (Thackeray 2008:339, Koch / Richter 2007:3).⁶ Consequently, in congruence with the main criterion of dialogic communication, social media not only allow for but are based on reciprocal exchange processes, where the action of one agent triggers a reaction of another, and vice versa.

According to Koch and Richter (2007:12f.), social media have three basic functions that they facilitate, to a variable extent. They may focus on the finding, evaluation and administration of information (information management), the self-presentation of users and the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relations between them (identity and network management) or the direct and indirect communication between users (interaction and communication).⁷ Social media can, thus, be defined as

“Web-based applications that support human information exchange, relationship building and its maintenance, communication and collaborative cooperation in a social or community context, and the data that emerge and the relationships between people who use these applications” (Ebersbach et al. 2008:29).

As we have seen earlier, an intercultural dialogue has characteristics that correspond to the various functions of social media. Being, by definition, oriented towards the interaction of communication partners (cf. interaction and communication) it not only aims at the pure exchange of ideas, feelings or intentions (cf. information management), but also helps to create the identity of the respective communication partners, and to shape the relationship between them (cf. identity and network management). That is to say social media – dependently on the emphasis they place on each of their functions – might in fact foster dialogic communication. However, it also suggests that different forms of social media might not support (intercultural) dialogue to the same degree. Indeed, in the following it will be argued that social networking services (SNS), more than other social media, are extremely appropriate for this.

3.2. Social Networking Services

One of the most commonly used forms of social media are SNS. SNS are special online communities aiming at the making and administration of professional or private social contact (Hippner 2006:13). In order to foster mutual communication between members of the network and the whole online community, different means of communication, such as forums or groups, pin boards, private messaging systems or chats, are provided. Beyond that, some networks also offer the possibility to exchange data, to react directly on other members' postings and to rate them (Hippner 2006:13f.).

Not least their wide distribution is a reason why SNS seem to be particularly useful means for intercultural dialogue. In fact, SNS are one of the most wide-

		Social presence / Media richness		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	<i>High</i>	Blogs	Social networking sites (e. g. Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e. g. Second Life)
	<i>Low</i>	Collaborative projects (e. g. Wikipedia)	Content communities (e. g. YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e. g. World of Warcraft)

Tab. 1: Classification of social media according to Kaplan / Haenlein (2010:62).

spread forms of social media applications. As early as in March 2007 they were used by almost 500 million people, more than half of the global online community. By now they have reached 1.2 billion users, i. e. one fifth of all online people. Independent of differences in government, infrastructure, Internet access and cultural practices, SNS are an essential element of the transnational online experience (comScore 2011:1ff.), with Facebook being the key global player in this sector so far. In October 2011, the page reached more than half of the global online community. About three of four minutes that were spent on a social networking website were spent here (BITKOM 2011:4f.). Thus, it is likely that, with view to international workcamps, SNS, and above all Facebook, have a particular potential for reaching most participants who have Internet access on their disposal.

Besides such international user behavior, certain distinctive features of SNS also reinforce the assumption that those social media applications might be very useful as a means for fostering intercultural dialogue. For an acquirement of an idea of what kinds of applications exist, what their main characteristics are and why they are more or less able to support intercultural dialogue, the category system suggested by Kaplan / Haenlein may here be beneficial. The authors distinguish several kinds of social media applications, which they categorize along a medial and a social dimension: blogs, collaborative projects, social networks, content communities, virtual

social worlds and virtual game worlds (cf. Tab 1; Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:62).

On the medial level, social media differ with regard to the degree to which they allow for physical, i. e. acoustic and visual, contact between communication partners. This aspect is also referred to as social presence. The more intimate and the more direct a medium is, the stronger the impression of social presence also is. Accordingly, synchronous media using different communication channels at the same time show a higher level of social presence than asynchronous media relying solely on one channel (Short / Williams / Christie 1976, Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61). Furthermore, the medial dimension is closely linked to the aspect of media richness. The term refers to the degree to which information is transmitted in a certain amount of time (Daft / Lengel 1986, Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61).

SNS are characterized by very fast and uncomplicated methods of information exchange, especially compared to often text-based collaborative projects and blogs, i. e. the degree of media richness is comparatively high. Beyond that, allowing for a combination of asynchronous and synchronous as well as one-sided and mutual communication channels just as the possibility to transcend solely text-based communication by allowing for the exchange of pictures, videos and other contents, SNS produce a comparatively high level of physical contact, i. e. social presence, between the communication partners (Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61f.).

With view to the preparation phase of international workcamps, this high degree of media richness and social presence can help reduce ambiguity and uncertainty (Daft / Lengel 1986, Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61) – which are particularly typical for intercultural communication contexts (Duronto / Nishida / Nakayama 2005:250) – therewith supporting the development of a basic feeling of trust (Genfen / Staub 2004:417, Rüggenberg 2007:217). This does not only provide for an increase in motivation for mutual communication (Duronto / Nishida / Nakayama

2005:552), it is also the basis for a successful (intercultural) dialogue (Conti 2012:188, James 1999:590f.).

On the social level, in turn, social media attain various potential with regard to self-presentation and self-disclosure (Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61). In other words, applications differ in the degree to which they allow for the active regulation of the impression that users make on their social environment (Mummendey 1995:111). On the other hand they also differ in the level to which it is possible to, consciously or unconsciously, to disclose personal information (e. g. thoughts and feelings) that correspond with the image one tries to create of oneself (Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:62).

SNS do not only theoretically offer an ideal setting for impression management (Mummendey 1995) but have proven to be used intensively for such purposes (e. g. Schouten 2007). By using the different opportunities for asynchronous communication wisely, users have the opportunity to convey a preferably positive and, hence, trustworthy image of themselves; for it is through the mutual revelation of the self that we understand with whom we engage (Simmel 1950:307, Weber / Carter 1998:16f.). Hence, the distinctive characteristics of SNS, on the social level, also support the assumption that SNS may foster (intercultural) dialogue between future volunteers.⁸

4. The user behavior of international volunteers under the microscope

As we have seen in the previous chapter, social media, above all SNS, have a high potential to foster intercultural dialogue. Since the participation in international workcamps, in general, is mainly motivated by the wish to get to know foreign countries and cultures and to establish new contacts (IJGD 2009:65), it does not seem unlikely that the participants are particularly interested in benefiting from this opportunity. In fact, as it has been outlined in the introduction to this paper, German youth workers have lately voiced the

impression that participants of (international) youth projects actually use social media and especially SNS extensively as a pre-project means of communication. However, it has not been explored systematically if such statements really are, indeed, justified.

In view of this fact, an empirical study was conducted in 2012. It was designed to determine if and how participants of international workcamps use social media to initiate pre-project communication and what influence this has on group processes on site – namely the development of communication networks, role structures and social cohesion (Burghardt 2013). Although the study did not analyze pre-project communication processes from an intercultural communication perspective, it can give some interesting insights into the question as to whether social media foster pre-project intercultural dialogue in international workcamps.

In the following, some central results of the mentioned work will be elucidated. However, the methodology and the results of the study can and will not be outlined in detail. The remarks will therefore be purely descriptive and should merely be considered a comprehensive review. For further details on theoretical concepts, measuring tools, statistical data and the like Burghardt (2013) should be consulted.

4.1. Method and sample

The study consisted of an extensive two-stage questionnaire survey and equally two-staged observations. The questionnaire-based elicitation comprised two partially standardized questionnaires the first of which was answered briefly before or on the first day and the second in the last third of the resp. workcamp. Both questionnaires consisted of quantitative and qualitative, as well as open and closed questions. While they both comprised questions on communication networks⁹, group roles¹⁰ and social cohesion¹¹ in the group, the first one additionally focused on the pre-project use of social media, above all SNS, and the second one contained questions

regarding the volunteers' impression of the influence of pre-project communication, as well as questions regarding their wishes for pre-project preparation in the future.

The questionnaire was sent to approximately 620 adolescents and young adults participating in 40 workcamps. Eventually, the questionnaire survey took place in 33 workcamps from three different German providers of international exchange programs, which focus on the organization and implementation of workcamps. 394 international volunteers between the age of 16 and 34 took part in the survey; an above average response rate of 63.5%. The average questionnaire was 20.5 years old. 54.6% of the questionnaires were female, 36% male¹², thus, representing the typical gender distribution in international workcamps (Euler 2011:11). Polled volunteers came from 34 countries in Europe, North and Middle America and Asia, with the Ukraine (38), Germany (33), Turkey (30), Spain (29), Russia (27) and South Korea (25) being represented the most.

The observations took place in two workcamps offered by the same provider. The observed groups consisted of 34 respectively 21 volunteers, mostly girls, between the age of 15 and 25, with the average age being 18.1 years. For practical as well as ethical reasons, an open participant observation was chosen. Additionally to pure observations, advantage was taken of the opportunity to conduct informal interviews with as many volunteers as possible. Observations and interview results were registered in a *memory log*.

4.2. General modalities of pre-project communication

Based on the questionnaire survey it can be stated that 51% of all polled volunteers at least tried to communicate with one or more other volunteers – either one-sidedly (e. g. via reading profiles and / or postings) or mutually (e. g. via chats or private messages). In the process, SNS played a very important role with 96.6% of the questionnaires who

strived after pre-project communication indicating that they used SNS for this purpose. Only in very few cases did they use e-mail services, the telephone, chat-programs or face-to-face meetings.

Strikingly, though not surprisingly, Facebook was the most commonly used SNS. 94.2% of those volunteers using SNS for pre-project communication attempts made recourse to this platform. While some volunteers from Eastern Europe also used Vkontakte, the Russian Facebook equivalent, other websites were hardly consulted.

Within SNS initial contact was mostly enabled by teamers, inviting participants to a group founded for the sole purpose of informing and interlinking participants. Some volunteers also used the search function of their SNS in order to find a camp specific group or other team members. Some openly searched for other volunteers in a previously existing group of their sending or hosting organization, were contacted by other volunteers or asked their sending organization directly for contact data of team members. No less than 47.9% of the volunteers looking for pre-project communication indicated that they had made an active effort to get in touch with other group members.

Once initial contact was made, two thirds of the respective volunteers tried to get a first impression of other group members by reading their profiles. A majority of them, instead or additionally, followed public postings in a group while only a few wrote public messages. A little more than one third also communicated via private messages, whereas only in one case the live chat function was indicated as means of communication. Remarkably, 64.2% of the questionnaires indicated that they, successfully or unsuccessfully, tried to communicate with other volunteers via SNS, partially or even exclusively followed profiles and postings of other group members.

Starting from the information that many volunteers actually looked for pre-project communication with other group members it was also examined in how far the attempt to communicate, as

well as the usage of SNS, depended on the demographic and geographic background of the questionees. It was found that gender did not have any influence on whether or not a volunteer tried to communicate with other group members. However, a little, but statistically relevant, influence was proven regarding the use of SNS. A possible correlation between the country of origin and the attempt for communication or the use of SNS could not be evidenced.¹³ Furthermore, an examination of the relation between age and pre-project communication attempts, as well as the use of SNS, also did not show a statistically relevant correlation. It can, therefore, be concluded that gender, age and country of origin do not have a significant influence on the pre-project communication behavior of international volunteers.

4.3. One-sided vs. mutual communication

Examining pre-project communication from an intercultural communication perspective, it is primarily interesting to analyze whether web-based communication took place solely one-sidedly or also mutually. The survey showed that, in fact, about two thirds of the volunteers attempting pre-project communication winded up having an active interpersonal exchange (65.4%). By absolute numbers this means that 116 volunteers reported a total of 286 persons with whom they have been in mutual contact. However, in 10.8% of those cases they already knew their communication partners before registering for the project (friends or relatives). In 29.4% of the remaining cases volunteers communicated with teamers, resolving questions on arrival, camp organization or the project; still, in 59.8% of cases mutual communication took place between two thus far unacquainted volunteers. Therefore, discussions within the frame of the participant observations also confirmed that volunteers often embraced the opportunity to get a first impression of other team members via their SNS profile. However, for the most part, they only followed profiles

and postings without initiating mutual communication processes.

Analyzing the remaining 59.8% who indicated having interacted with others before the beginning of their workcamps, it has to be considered that not all volunteers answered the questionnaires. Beyond that, the answers of some volunteers were contradictory, which might be due to inaccuracies in responding to the questionnaire or to misinterpretations of the questions asked. It is also possible that certain contacts were not perceived to be relevant.

Subsequently, only 30 cases could be identified in which, beyond doubt, mutual communication took place between two hitherto unacquainted volunteers.¹⁴ Even though, on first sight, this seems to be quite a high number with 33 workcamps being comprehensively or partially examined, an in depth analysis of the sample shows that this amounts to only 1.5% of the communication channels that have been acquired with help of the questionnaires – not taking into account the communication channels that could not be acquired because individual volunteers of some camps did not take part in the survey.¹⁵ It can hence be ascertained that the potential of social media to foster pre-project dialogue seems hardly to be fully utilized.

4.4. Communication partners

In case hitherto unacquainted volunteers joined in mutual communication, different reasons were given for the establishing of contact. The clarification of organizational questions was named most often (17.7%), with the planning of a joint journey being the main topic. Second most important was the first impression that the respective communication partner made of a person, for example through his or her profile or public postings (11.6%). Thus, the other person was considered to be nice, funny or attractive. In third place the same country of origin or the same languages were cited as reasons. Just as often, the other person's activity within the SNS played a role (each 8.8%). Occasionally, it was also stated that the other person

took the initiative (3.3%) or that the same gender (1.7%) or same interests played a certain role (0.6%).

While only in 8.8% of the cases of mutual communication nationality or language were mentioned as reason for getting in contact, taking into consideration the national backgrounds of all volunteers who entered into a dialogue before the beginning of the project including those cases in which other motivational reasons for a first approach were indicated, it occurs that no less than 36.3% of the dialogic communication processes took place between people with the same mother tongue or coming from the same home country. This was primarily explained by the preparation of a joint arrival, common conversational topics and a lack of language barriers. Beyond that it is also possible that volunteers with the same cultural background were primarily contacted because, here, fear of contact did not come into effect. It is also not unlikely that the anticipation of unknown living and working conditions as well as the isolation from friends and family fostered a longing for similarities, security and orientation, especially among younger and/or inexperienced participants (Budke 2003:45, Burghardt 2013).

4.5. The development of group dynamics

Besides the general communications behavior between the volunteers, the described survey also aimed at examining the social structures resulting from a possible contact. Special emphasis was placed upon the development of the following group dynamic aspects: communication networks, role structure and social group cohesion.

Starting from the premise that a more or less intense dialogue between volunteers is reflected by the development of certain social structures, some central results of the survey will be mentioned briefly in the following.

The questionnaires as well as the participating observation showed that in none

of the camps an extensive network of mutual communication was developed including the majority or even all members of the group. Instead some smaller, partially interlinked subgroups arose – mostly taking the form of dyads or triads. The few communication networks developed in advance were, at least in part, stable and survived throughout the whole project. If this was actually due to previous online communications or if other factors, such as common national background or the experience of a joint journey, were more decisive cannot be concluded from the data.¹⁶

Consequently, it is not surprising that no role structures emerged previous to the examined camps. Only in a few cases, first ascriptions of the above-mentioned roles took place – positive as well as negative. However, considering that merely a minority of the group was in contact and answered the respective questions, it is questionable if there can be talk of actual group roles.

As communication and group cohesion are directly linked (Schneider 1985:75f.), it is furthermore not surprising that, considering the loose networks of mutual communication, group cohesion at the beginning of a camp was rather low. Only a few participants showed rather negative feelings towards the group whereas a majority showed a positive appraisal. Further analyses showed no correlation between early virtual communication and cohesion. While an influence of (mutual) pre-project communication on cohesion could not be ultimately proven at group level, participant observation showed that on the individual level, participants interacted more familiarly if they had mutual contact previous to the camp. However, in those cases, contact was comparatively intense.

All in all, the evaluation of this part of the survey confirms the impression voiced earlier: (intercultural) dialogue is somewhat rare among the volunteers and, in the few cases where it does take place, it does not seem to be very intense. As a result, the development of social structures can scarcely be found in the examined workcamps.

5. Discussion

Within this article, intercultural dialogue has been defined as a mutual exchange of information between two or more people with different cultural, in this case national, backgrounds. Starting from this premise, it has been shown that social media retain a high potential for fostering such communicative processes, since they are widely used and, by nature, aim at a reciprocal exchange between two or more people. Especially SNS are used extensively and allow for a trusting atmosphere and multidimensional communication contexts. They, therefore, seem to be particularly apt to foster pre-project communication in international workcamps.

Even though practitioners identified this potential and were under the impression, social media and above all SNS, already had an extensive influence on participants' pre-project behavior, it can be concluded from the data that this thesis does not prove to be accurate, at least not with a view to the analyzed international workcamps. Indeed, communication took place between many volunteers. However, the respective volunteers communicated mostly, sometimes even exclusively, one-sidedly by reading profiles and postings. A real interaction with the other person only rarely occurred. In numerous cases, contents were only consumed, without initiating mutual communicative negotiation processes, with the result that no significant social structures, i. e. communication and role structure as well as group cohesion, were formed.

Regarding the intercultural dimension of the survey, it could be shown that dialogue often took place between volunteers of the same home country or at least the same language. Even though this was not always explicitly given as a reason for entering into contact, it is quite likely that similarities in cultural backgrounds played an important role in the choice of communication partners. Besides, other similarities such as the same gender or interests were also mentioned as decisive factors. Hence, intercultural dialogue – in the sense of

international dialogue, and for that matter also in its broader sense – was not particularly fostered by social media, resp. SNS. To the contrary, uncertainty avoidance rather than curiosity, or a wish for intercultural learning, seem to characterize the volunteers' current communication strategies.

Considering that social media have a great potential for intercultural dialogue, it is reasonable to argue that the numerous socializing and learning opportunities are mostly neglected. The question arises why no mutual communication was sought. While a majority of the questionees did not indicate any special reason for the waiving of mutual communication, others indicated a range of internal and external factors that led to this decision.

With view to internal factors it was primarily the volunteers' general attitude towards SNS that played an important role. Accordingly, the preference for personal contact in comparison to computer-mediated contact was cited most often. Furthermore, the virtual exchange with strangers was characterized as unusual. Some volunteers even pointed out explicitly that they did not see a reason why they should talk to strangers on the Internet. Others said that they were just not used to communicating online, or that they preferred E-mail. Beyond that, shyness, a subjective feeling of poor language competence in English, as well as laziness were cited as reasons. Some volunteers also admitted that they did not feel an active exchange to be important because they would meet everybody in person once they arrived on site.

External factors that were mentioned were a lack of common conversational topics, a lack of time or irregular access to a computer or the Internet. Occasionally, the waiver of mutual communication was also explained by the other volunteers' passiveness. Either it was claimed that nobody participated in the existing Facebook group or that the others had never been online.

Those answers are quite striking considering the number of (young) people using the Internet extensively in their

day-to-day-life. One might be tempted to put the quite provocative question: Do the volunteers, to be undoubtedly be considered as so called *digital natives*, feel really that much at home in the World Wide Web? Do they simply not want to meet people, above all of different cultural background, online or do they just require more guidance? The questionnaire and interviews during the participant observations suggest that the latter is the case. Thus, three quarters of all volunteers taking part in the survey had been in contact with other volunteers before their camp and/or answered that, the next time, they would like to get to know the other participants and teamers before the project.

For practitioners in international youth work, this means choosing whether they leave the decision to get into contact or not entirely to the participants, or if they wish to specifically foster pre- (and for that matter also post-) project-interaction. Considering the great potential that social media not only have for encouraging intercultural dialogue but also for supporting actual intercultural learning processes (cf. e. g. Bolten 2006, Bolten 2010), it would seem reasonable to craft comprehensive policies on how to support such processes by making use of the virtual means that we retain so numerously.

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Endnotes

1. Own translation: "By offering mutual aid, the international voluntary service is aimed at creating a new spirit between nations, a spirit of sincere friendship which renders the decent on neighbouring countries morally impossible" (Ceresole cited after Anet 1969:234).
2. While the term *social learning*, in this case, refers to observational learning as Bandura described it, an extended definition has taken root in the pedagogical sector in Germany. Here, it now also includes the learning of social modes of behavior such as the ability to cooperate and communicate (Wellhöfer 1993:99f.).

3. As early as in the 1970s, Merten (1977:27) identified more than 160 definitions each approaching the term communication from a specific scientific perspective. With that said, the presented definition does not raise the claim to be comprehensive. It should only serve as working definition for the following elucidations.
4. Many authors argue that intercultural communication only takes place if the communication partners perceive each other as being different, i. e. when the cultural differences which are realized on different levels become relevant to them (e. g. Conti 2012:215, Loenhoff 2003, Rathje 2006). Even though the aspect of perceived differences is central to intercultural encounters, it cannot be discussed in detail in this article. As mentioned earlier, this is due to the fact that, on the one hand, the topic is approached from a media-centered point of view. On the other hand, the author only has a very limited insight into the exact course of communicative processes as well as the volunteers' world of thoughts. Therefore, it cannot be reconstructed with certainty whether cultural differences were actually perceived and considered to be relevant.
5. The term Web 2.0 was minted by Tim O'Reilly in the year 2004. After the demise of leading web-companies in autumn 2001, experts predicted a loss of importance with regard to the Internet. However, the internet arose even more strengthened and changed from this crisis, being now referred to by O'Reilly (2007:17) as Web 2.0.
6. In fact scientists and practitioners are divided over the question where the line between social media, often referred to as social software, and Web 2.0 has to be drawn. As a consequence the termini are used inconsistently and partially synonymously (Alby 2008:89). Kaplan / Haenlein explicitly isolate the two words from one another. They define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61).
7. While the terms direct and indirect communication usually refer to mediated in contrast to unmediated forms of communication (Burmeister 2008:5f.), in this context, it can be assumed that Koch / Richter refer to synchronous compared to asynchronous communication processes as communication via social media by definition is mediated.
8. Admittedly, those social as well as medial preconditions are also met by virtual social worlds (e. g. Second Life) – partially even more so as they try to transfer all dimensions of face-to-face interaction on the virtual environment (Kaplan / Haenlein 2010:61ff.). However, in contrast to SNS, they do not primarily focus on the intensification and maintenance of real world contacts. Instead a new, virtual reality should be created in which users interact (Ebersbach et al. 2008:79). Therefore, virtual social worlds probably do not play an important role when establishing contacts between volunteers.
9. In order to get an insight in communication networks, the participants had to indicate with whom they talked how often and on which topics.
10. The following typical group roles were measured using sociometric items: leader, outsider, follower – e. g. "I would prefer to share a room with him / her." and "He / She rarely takes part in group activities."
11. In order to measure group cohesion, the Group Attitude Scale of Evans / Jarvis (1986) was applied. Based on the elucidations of Pramlal / Parumasur (2007:172ff.), the scale was amended by four items on open and honest communication.
12. 9.4% did not provide information on their gender.
13. However, considering the low number of volunteers from some countries, a correlation cannot be ruled out conclusively.
14. That is to say that 60 times a person named another person as communication partner and was likewise identified as communication partner by the other person.
15. In total, 2228 available symmetric communication channels between volunteers were acquired.
16. In fact, the questionnaires as well as the observations suggest that nationality and language as well as previously existing friendships and genealogical relationships had by far more influence on communication structures than pre-project online communication.